

Rialto Theater Research Guide

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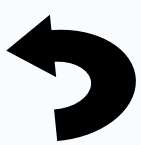


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New Rialto Theater Opens Here on Saturday Night. (1925). *The Federated News*. 2.

Rialto Theatre Opens to Capacity House Saturday. (1925). *The Federated News*. 4.

Brandenburg, P. (1998). **Rialto Theater.** *The Quarterly*. 5.

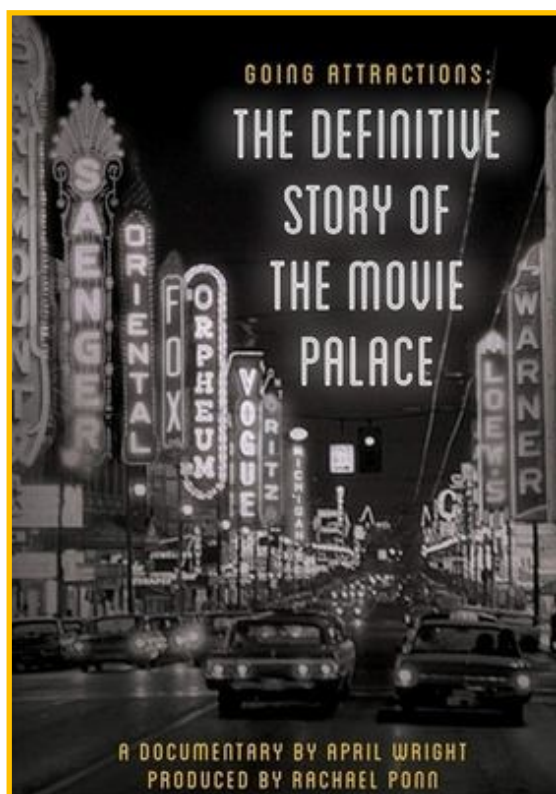
Duncan, G. (2001). **Where For Art, Thou Rialto?** *The Quarterly*. 7.

LeValley, N. **Rialto.** (n.d.).

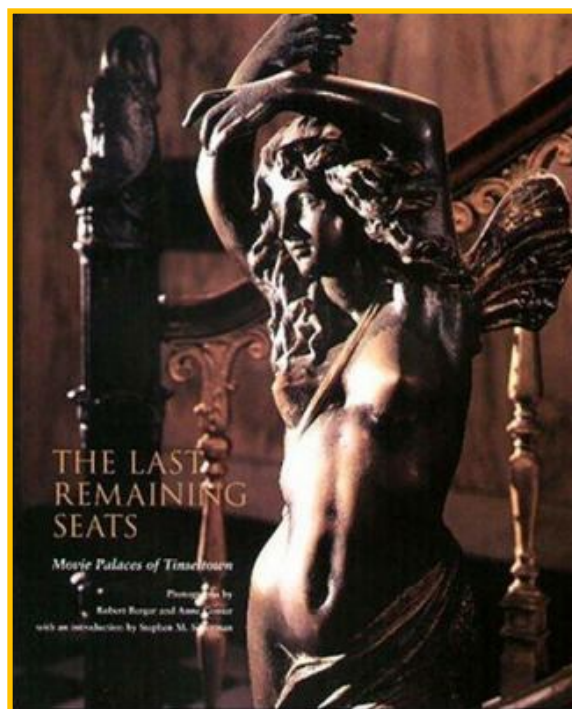


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Going Attractions: The Definitive
Story of the Movie Palace (DVD)
dir. April Wright



The Last Remaining Seats: Movie
Palaces of Tinseltown
by Robert Berger and Anne Conser



WEBSITE LINKS

Historic Rialto Theater

Friends of the Rialto. (n.d.). Historic Rialto Theater. <https://historicrialtotoheater.org/friends-of-the-rialto/>

Los Angeles Conservancy

Rialto Theater. (2020). Los Angeles Conservancy. <https://www.laconservancy.org/locations/rialto-theatre>

Los Angeles Historic Theater Foundation

Rialto Theater, South Pasadena. (2019). Los Angeles Historic Theater Foundation. <https://www.lahtf.org/rialtosouthpasadena/>

Rialto Theater Restoration

Glazier, Bill. (2020). *Rialto Theater Restoration*. South Pasadenan. <https://southpasadenan.com/rialto-theatre-restoration-a-cinema-treasures-major-facelift/>



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CONTACT INFORMATION

E-mail: localhistory@southpasadenaca.gov

Phone: (626) 403-7359



at families may have them out, patronize the bazaar and and for the show in the evening children are sure to be delighted with the features of the bazaar for their benefit, the ice and soft drinks, grab bag, bally and finally the mystery.

power and plant booth will offer opportunities for home garden to replenish their bulbs and plants and to give many of them to be sold. Mrs. Ingoldsby nan of this booth and she following members of her may be phoned in regard by those who may be able to donations: Mrs. Robert Mrs. Clayton Palmer, Mrs. Zehner, Mrs. T. R. Jones. George C. Groenewegen.

30 P.-T. A. Hold Interesting Meeting

Marengo Avenue P.-T. A. held meeting on October 13. The room, where the meeting held, has been greatly enlarged and somewhat enlarged by the of a stage. The room was capacity and it is hoped that hers will maintain the attendance set by this first meeting.

of interest to all present was Mrs. S. G. Pollard concern proposed water bonds.

Wilma E. Ballard, who had the program, had a message for the mothers old and a keynote of which was "optimism and loyalty."

Ballard was pleased to introduce of the Marengo mothers asicians of the afternoon. The on listened with pleasure to a group of songs sung by Robertson, accompanied by V. Stair.

enrollment of new members on gave evidence of the activity membership committee whose n is Mrs. Frank Shafer. Missie Anne Sallenger gave an recitation illustrative of the estimate of the importance of P. A. ending with the little "Don't some one ask my mother in the P.-T. A."

Burton Heartt was called upon for information concerning the bazaar that all might realize the importance of the big success of the air.

announcement was made that Ma will not only have the handf booth, which is in charge of W. Hamilton, but will also lunch counter at which coffee and sandwiches will be served from 11:30 to 1:30. Mrs. Groenewegen will be in charge of

NEW RIALTO THEATER OPENS HERE ON SATURDAY NIGHT

Exceptional Program Is Advertised; Doors Will Open at 6:30 P. M.

"All eyes will turn toward Fair Oaks and Oxley Saturday night," so reads the advertisement for the new Rialto theater today and picture followers of South Pasadena will very likely agree that such a statement is no exaggeration for, for some time hundreds of people have passed by the handsome new theater building during its period of construction and wondered when it would be thrown open to the service of an amusement loving community.

Saturday night, tomorrow at 6:30, the Rialto will open its doors to vie for public approval, for the first time and Manager Gray has promised an exceptional program to constitute the gala opening attraction.

The Rialto will accommodate 800 people on the main floor and 400 in the balcony and is so constructed that every balcony seat affords a good view of the stage as does the main floor chairs. Also the architectural construction of the auditorium permits excellent acoustics and a reinforced wall separating the auditorium from the foyer kills any possible noise which might occur outside the theater and disturb those within. This feature, in addition to comfortable chairs all over the house, gives the new theater an atmosphere of restfulness and quiet which enhances any performance.

For the opening performances Saturday evening the Rialto will present by special arrangement with Universal pictures the world's premier of a new super-play which is scheduled for general release in 1926 and it is expected that a number of the famous players in the cast will attend the Rialto performance.

In addition to this premier, five acts of Western Vaudeville Managers' Association vaudeville and an appropriate musical program will be offered. The acts comprising the vaudeville program will be:

The Aerial LaValls, trapeze artists of distinction; Norma Gregg in an original novelty, the Steff Trio; and Grant Gardner, that colored gentleman from the Cascares Islands; the Dance Carnival, a tersichorean creation with music. Roy Metcalfe Raymond Theater concert organist, will play a selected organ overture and the Rialto orchestra under the leader-

Party and Dance

The local Rebekah lodge will have a Halloween party and dance in the lodge rooms Saturday, October 31. It is to be a real get-together time not for the purpose of making money although a small admission charge will be made, just enough to cover expenses. Another special feature will be Professor Smith and his orchestra of 30 pieces which alone is a rare treat for those who love good music.

Halloween refreshments will be served. Further announcement will appear in next weeks issue of this paper.

Rialto Theatre
The Federated News
16 October 1925

Grand Chapter Holds Annual Session

The fifty-second annual session of the Grand Chapter of the State of California, of the Order of the Eastern Star, will convene in Santa Cruz October 26.

Those representing the South Pasadena Chapter are Mrs. G. H. Rust, worthy matron and Mrs. E. A. Taylor, associate matron.

* * *

Celebrates Eighty-fourth Birthday Anniversary

Mrs. O. P. Haney quietly celebrated her eighty-fourth birthday anniversary on Saturday at her apartments in the Bondies Sanitorium on Mission street. Flowers and greetings of various kinds were received from her friends and relatives who came during the day to pay tribute of love to Mrs. Haney upon this great occasion and to wish for her many happy returns of the day.

Her feeble physical condition made it impossible for the friends to celebrate the affair in an extensive way. Mrs. Haney has been a resident of South Pasadena for the past ten years during which time she has endeared herself to a large circle of friends.

* * *

Sewing Bee

Mrs. E. P. Gates held a sewing bee for the Lincoln Park P.-T. A. last Friday from 10 to 4, at her home, 1215 Gates place, for the purpose of making handkerchief-aprons to be sold at the fancy work booth of the P.-T. A. bazaar to be held at the high school grounds on October 24, next.

Luncheon was served and besides much good work being accomplished, a most delightful time was experienced by all present.

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aving bulbs and flowers 2 may notify Mrs. W. A. liot 1515 for collection. ooked food for the bazaar ed for by notifying Mrs. lilton, Eliot 1585 or Mrs. lor, Eliot 2063. All to be sent to the school. oon closed with a recep-teachers and refreshments

Park Study Circle Have Meeting

October 12, the Lincoln Circle opened their club most interesting meeting of Mrs. Caroline Adams, venue.

Heleen presented the city's tion to the members and the need of the

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The Rialto program for its initial week will start Monday and Monday, Peter B. Kyne's "Never the Twain Shall Meet" with Anna Kew, art and Bert Lytel and a Harry Langdon comedy; Tuesday and Wednesday, Lon Chaney in "The Tower of Lies," and a Van Bibber comedy; on Thursday and Friday, Rex Beach's "The Goose Woman," with Louise Dresser, and on Thursday evening only, preview vaudeville and on Saturday evening only Vilma Banky and Ronald Colman in "The Dark Angel" and five acts of vaudeville.

The Rialto will carry out a policy of four changes of program each and every week, new bills being offered Sunday, Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday. Each Thursday evening will bring as a special attraction in addition to the photoplay, preview vaudeville and every Saturday will bring

October 20.

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J. O. C. Class Meets

Miss Fannie Howarth, Mrs. Margaret Jacobs and Miss Olive Perry were joint hostesses on Tuesday evening to the members of the J. O. C. class at the home of Miss Howarth, 614 Magnolia street. Initiation of officers for the ensuing year, also initiation of new members. Games and delicious refreshments followed their business session.

five acts of high class vaudeville with the best picture attractions. On Saturday and Sundays matinees will be given and on other days two showings each evening will be the rule. The new theater's policy dedicates itself to community service with strict adherence to a high standard of photoplays and vaudeville acts, courtesy and satisfaction and hopes to merit its adopted loyalty, "the people's playhouse."

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RIALTO THEATRE OPENS TO CAPACITY HOUSE SATURDAY

Splendid Program Given Before Very Appreciative Audience

The Rialto Theater, South Pasadena's new theater, opened to the public last Saturday evening. The theater was crowded, many being present from the Hollywood studios. Huge searchlights were sent over from Hollywood and played upon the heavens throughout the evening.

The theater is East Indian architecture and is decorated in accordance with that country. Vivid colors predominate. The seats are upholstered in blue leather and the decorations and furnishings are very elaborate.

The entire appearance is rich and pleasing. The performance began at 7 p. m. Roy Metcalfe organist from the Raymond theater, played the musical overture on the Wurlitzer organ.

The program included a comedy, "What Happened to Jones." William Selter, the director, producing the play, together with the stars, Mr. Drury and Miss La Plante were introduced by Mr. Gray, the local manager of the theater.

The Western Managers' Vaudeville association presented five acts of vaudeville.

Mr. Gray and the officials of the company received many congratulations upon the playhouse and the program given.

Lincoln Park Study

Circle Will Meet Oct. 26

The next regular meeting of the Lincoln Park Study Circle will be held Monday, October 26, at 2 p. m., at the home of Mrs. H. D. Bauman, 709 Grand avenue.

Mrs. George A. Daniels of Pasadena, will address the club on California history and landmarks. A number of new members are to be voted upon and reports from the last President's Council to be given.



Mary Brown Luncheon Hostess

Miss Mary Brown of this city was hostess at a daintily appointed bridge luncheon at which she entertained a number of her girl friends.

Among those who were present to enjoy the occasion were: Miss Mildred Fabry, Miss Ruth Fabry, Miss Emma Culver, Miss Elizabeth Scattergood, Miss Mary Packard, Miss Margaret Thompson, Evelyn Klemm, Miss Elsie Schafer, Miss Vanna Peters, Miss Jeanette Young, Miss Frances Thompson, Miss Mary Sullivan and the hostess, Miss Mary Brown.

* * *

Altar Society Meeting

Last week at the monthly meeting of the Altar Society of the Holy Family Church which was held at the home of Mrs. John H. Geir, 2032 Pine street, a motion was made and carried that the name of the Altar Society be changed to the Catholic Women's Guild.

No change will be made in the Altar section of the organization as in the past, but this new arrangement will include a larger number of the church women than in the past.

Plans were also made for an Apron and cooked food sale to be held at the rectory on November 14.

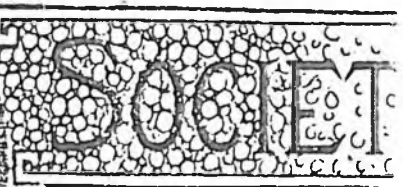
* * *

Lovely Home Wedding

Charming in its lovely simplicity was the marriage of Miss Yeteve Wakefield and Elmer Wreden of Los Angeles which took place at the home of Mrs. Earl Messer at her Pasadena home.

The bride was very charming in a chic travelling costume of burnt orange and carried chrysanthemums in the same shade. The wedding

Rialto Theatre
The Federated News
25 October 1925



Dinner and Theater Party

Miss Marcia Cass, daughter of A. B. Cass of 1601 Fair Oaks, entertained recently with a daintily appointed dinner and theater party in honor of the hostesses' club. Mary E. Cass of Texas.

Those present were: A. B. Cass, Miss Patricia J. Cass, Miss Susan Tufts, Stanlie Lester, Samson and the hostess, Marcia Cass.

* * *

Naval Ball Soon

Invitations have been sent for the annual naval ball which will be held this year at the Biltmore in honor of Admiral Samuel D. Ingham of the United States Navy and his staff.

Among the well known women who are prominent in the preparations is Miss Mary Hoyt of Buena Vista.

* * *

Returns from Abroad

After a four-months' vacation, Frank A. Stone has returned home at 1717 Diamond avenue. That time Mrs. Stone, some 17,000 miles, her journey across the Atlantic, France, Italy, Belgium, Holland and England. She also made en route home, New York, Washington, D. C. and San Francisco.

* * *

Local Girl Taking Part in College Production

Miss Dorothy Davis, who from the South Pasadena has been cast for "The Bachelor," which seniors at the University of Southern California will produce at the Bovard auditorium on December 4. Rehearsals for the play, by Ellsworth Ross, a student at the university, will begin at once.

Miss Davis will take the happy-go-lucky widow who prides for everybody. Last night Davis took a prominent part in the play and received

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Rialto Theatre

BY POLLY BRANDENBURG • WATERCOLOR BY DEEDY PETERS



My love affair with the Rialto Theatre began in 1967 when I moved to South Pasadena. The program changed each week-end, so the Rialto, with its slightly tarnished, but still majestic gilded and painted interior features, became a Friday or Saturday night date for a new resident.

There was a special intimacy about the grand old movie house; a shared, though anonymous, sense of companionship when the audience laughed or cried together. One evening, still in the 1960s, almost everyone in the balcony and on the main floor came to their feet during a shocking moment in the suspense movie *Wait Until Dark*. After looking around sheepishly, we laughed, and sat down again, closer than we had been before.

Although the theater had seen better days by that time, there were occasions when the old glamour was again evident. I attended a number of Richard Wright organ concerts, beginning around 1969, before the mighty Wurlitzer theater organ suffered a fiery disability a few years later. Theater organ buffs know how to do things right, and

many of them arrived in formal attire. The lights seemed brighter reflected off rhinestones, and the carpets glowed with previously unseen highlights.

In such moments, it was easy to imagine what the Rialto was like on October 17, 1925, its premier opening night, which Jane Apostol describes so vividly in her centennial history of South Pasadena.

Klieg lights and Hollywood stars marked the opening. The initial program featured five vaudeville acts and the world premiere of a silent film comedy, *What Happened to Jones?* starring Reginald Denny and Laura LaPlante.

The theater had a full stage and the mammoth Wurlitzer organ. Exuberant press releases, Apostol said, also described overstuffed chairs in the loges, paintings of exquisite effect on the walls, and "draperies of the richest reds, blues, greens and yellows blended into restful mellowness under carefully shielded lights."

Designed by architect L.A. Smith, the Moorish-styled structure was to achieve list-

ing in the National Register of Historic Places in 1977.

A general admission ticket was 30 cents; expensive loge seats were 40 cents; and children under twelve were admitted free – vaudeville and a movie for the entire family, in an elegant setting, costing less than a dollar in 1925.

When the "talkies" came in 1929, a sound system was added. In 1930, a ticket to the theater included admission to South Pasadena's first miniature golf course built by Walter Gillette on the lawn of his Fair Oaks residence.

The Rialto had the distinction of being the try-out stage for vaudeville's renowned producers, Fanchon & Marco, with many of the acts ending up at the famed Paramount Theater in Los Angeles. Vaudeville declined a few years later, and a theatrical group, The Charles Royal Players, presented matinee performances twice a week, with productions like *Charlie's Aunt*, *Peg o' My Heart*, and *The Outcast*. Now it was possible to see a play and a movie for 75 cents, and South Pasadena

was getting its first taste of professional theater.

Vaudeville returned briefly in the early '30s, and the Orpheum Theater's famed musical conductor, a man named Frankenstein, became conductor for a few months — until a backstage fire closed the theater. When the Rialto reopened, vaudeville was gone for good.

Fire was again a problem on October 28, 1972, when a blaze broke out in one of the pipe chambers of the organ. According to the Los Angeles Theatre Organ Society, firefighters broke through the roof and quickly extinguished the blaze, but not before the pipework had melted to a solidified puddle of metal and the solo manual chest had crashed through the burning chamber floor. The blower room was in two inches of water, but the only sign of a fire inside the theater was the hole firemen made in the pipe chamber grill as they broke through to fight the fire.

In 1976, the theater was purchased by Landmark Theatre Corporation and began a new existence as a first-run house for foreign language and independently produced films. The Rocky Horror Picture Show cult film was also featured at midnight on Saturdays.

During South Pasadena's Centennial Celebration in 1988, the Rialto was treated to

another "dress-up night." According to the *South Pasadena Review*, on June 4, "... while searchlight beams streaked across the sky, glamorous Zsa Zsa Gabor, now the Princess von Anhalt, stepped from a white limousine to a flourish of trumpets and thunderous applause from excited fans massed before the Rialto Theater.

"The Princess, lovely in an original Jane Avril costume worn in the movie *Moulin Rouge*, was accompanied by her husband Prince von Anhalt, resplendent in full-dress uniform, and by Centennial Committee chairman, Ted Shaw."

Princess Zsa Zsa joined a sell-out crowd for a screening of *Moulin Rouge*, and the venerable landmark returned to ordinary life the next day. The historic bronze plaque and Centennial star placed in the sidewalk in front of the theater still remain, however, as reminders of the Rialto's last "big night."

Now, South Pasadena's beloved theater is entering a new phase. This year Landmark Theatre Corporation approached the city with plans to create a five screen multiplex, saying that single screen theaters were no longer economically feasible.

At first residents were incensed at the idea of "chopping up" their Rialto, but Landmark demonstrated what they had done to similar theaters, retaining most historical

features, and creating what appear to be tasteful changes to the original buildings. People began to think about the project with enthusiasm, although parking and traffic problems were concerns.

Working closely with the Cultural Heritage Commission to preserve as many historical features as possible, Landmark proposes to keep the main auditorium, and to divide the existing balcony into two theaters, separated from the main floor by a high wall on steel pillars, which would not be attached to the existing walls.

Two additional theaters will be installed in the front section of the second-floor, now occupied by retail offices, with a projection booth between them. Seats, carpets and draperies will be replaced, as well as heating and air conditioning. An elevator will be installed and the restrooms remodeled. A new state-of-the-art sound system will also be among the improvements in the project, which is budgeted at \$1.5 million.

On January 26, the South Pasadena Planning Commission approved a Conditional Use Permit, which set Landmark on the road to breathing new life into South Pasadena's historic jewel. Sometime, before too long, it may be possible for a spiffier Rialto to provide comfort to another newcomer to South Pasadena.



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WHERE FOR ART, THOU

By GLEN DUNCAN
PHOTOGRAPHY BY WILLIAM ERICSON

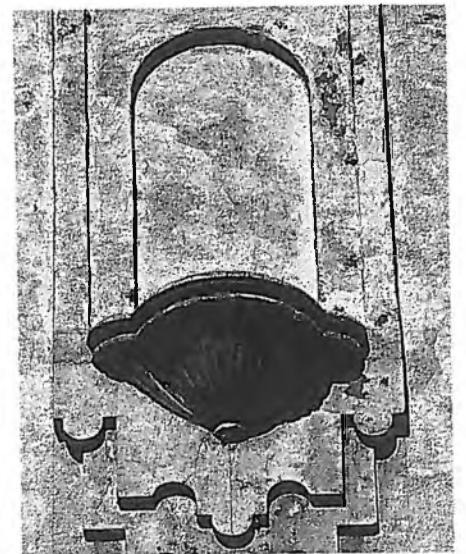
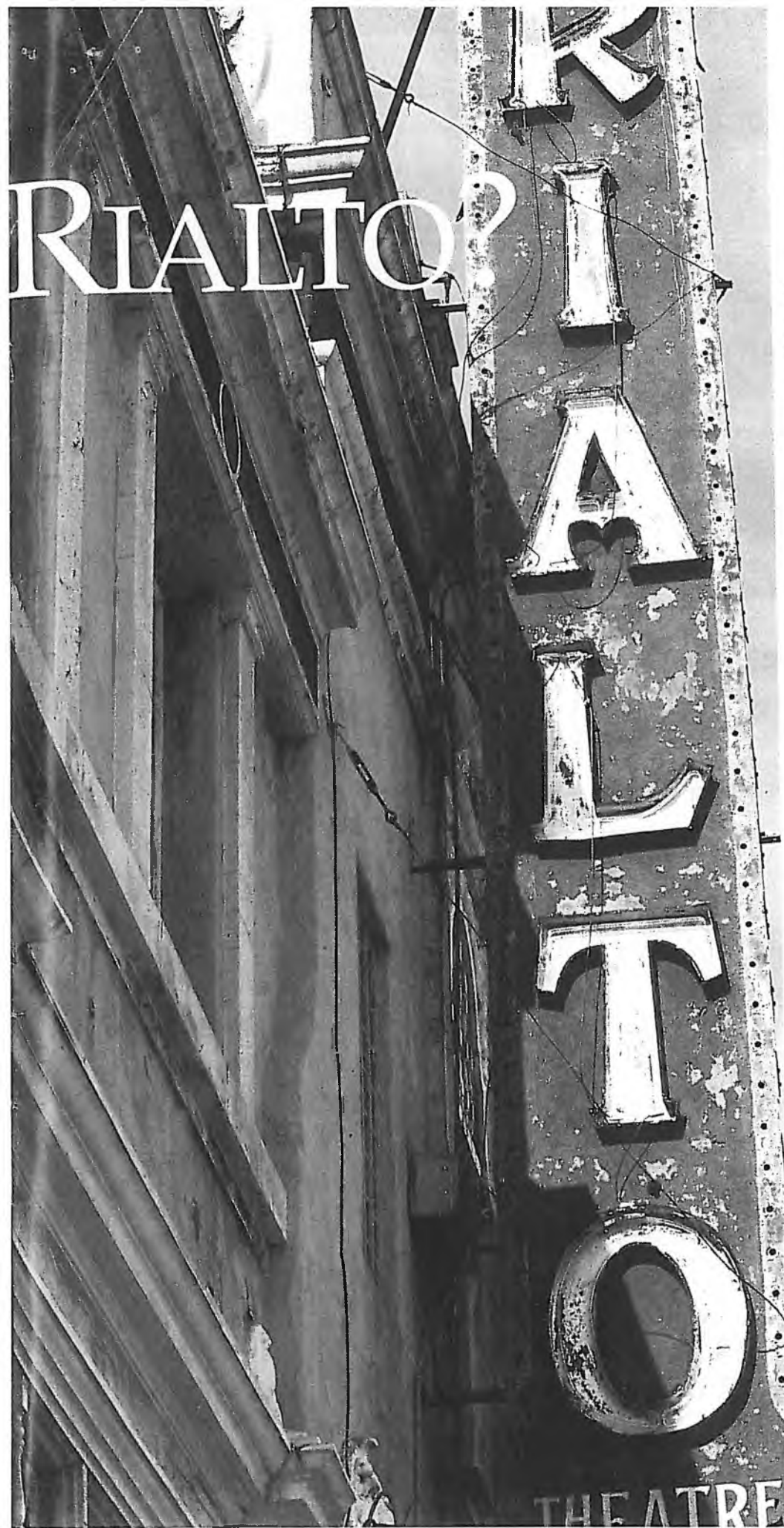
It was 1925 and the town was alive. The best electric rail service of any community our size in the world tooted through town, but we were crazy about cars. Eight automobile dealerships stretched along Mission Street and Fair Oaks Avenue. But cars weren't the only rage. The lure of the silver screen and live entertainment had captured our fun-loving fancy.

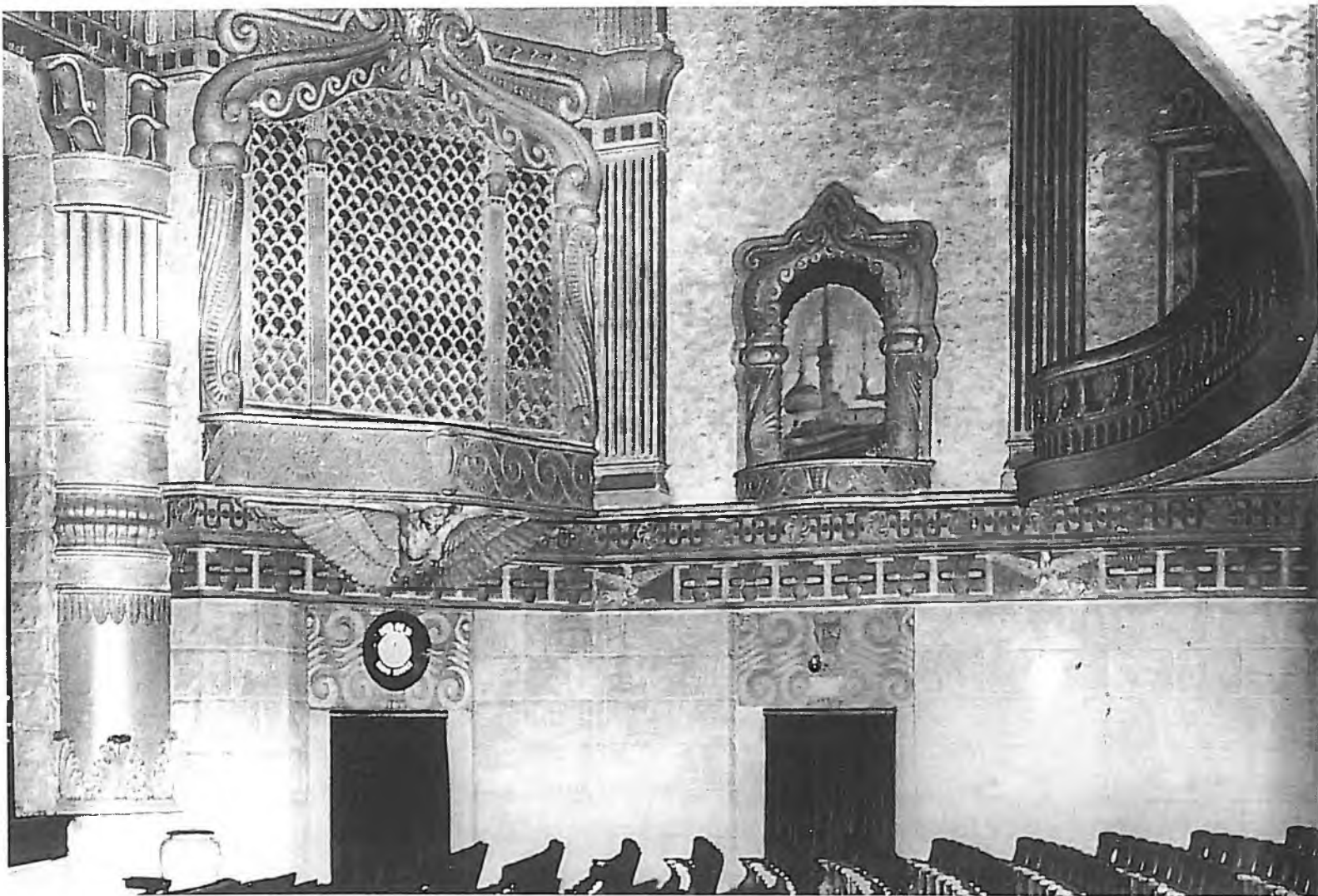
The movie palaces of the twenties were in the imagery business. Movies brought romance, adventure, hilarity, suspense, thrills and chills galore and the movie palaces themselves were part of the show. Theatergoing at premiere theaters such as the Orpheum, the Palace and Mayan theaters downtown, the Chinese, the Egyptian and the El Capitan in Hollywood, the Avalon on Catalina Island, and the Rialto in South Pasadena was a magical experience. The splendor of the great old theaters was a big part of what once made going to the movies such a social experience.

Times are different now and maybe movies aren't the end-all and be-all events they once were, but seeing even the best of them on video or in one of those claustrophobic, cinder-boxes in the multiplexes is, to me, like eating a prime steak dinner in pill form.

The Rialto, with its exotic, eclectic, Spanish Baroque/Moorish trappings, Batchelder tile drinking fountain niche, and glaring mythological beast with red eyes staring down from the proscenium arch, still makes movie going an event. Perhaps not the social experience of yesteryear, but after







This interior view of the Rialto, photo circa 1945, is an example of the splendor of the great old theaters.

Korea and Vietnam, Nixon and Clinton, we are not the same people who thrilled to the adventures of *The Sheik*, howled at the antics of Keaton and Chaplin, or fell in love with Clara Bow.

The Rialto was the premiere theater for the San Gabriel Valley. After Hollywood and downtown, films would come here before wider distribution. We didn't get nearly the fanfare and glamour of the Holly-

wood premieres, but some of the glitter did trickle out here. So the Rialto represents a legitimate claim on the movie palace legacy for people here in the west valley. It's a Historic Landmark in the City of

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South Pasadena and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

The Rialto opened Saturday night, October 17, 1925. L. A. Smith, who also designed several other theaters, including the Vista in Hollywood and the Arabian-style Beverly Theater in Beverly Hills, designed it. The gala event, with huge searchlights playing upon the heavens throughout the evening, featured the world premiere of Universal Pictures' *Whatever Happened to Jones* and five vaudeville acts. Sitting with the eager audience that night, we would have been treated to a trapeze performance by The Aerial La Vails, an original novelty by Norma Gregg, The Stein Trio, and a sidesplitting sketch by Grant Gardner from the Canary Islands. Winding up the vaudeville performances was a terpsichorean creation with music by The Dance Carnival. Roy Metcalfe played an overture on the theatre organ and the Rialto orchestra under the direction of Eno Moulton provided musical accompaniment for the vaudeville and picture program. And for all that, general admission was just 30 cents.

The Rialto program changed four times a week and the vaudeville acts were offered on Saturday. Notable films following the Rialto's opening included Lon Chaney in the *Tower of Lies*, Louise Dresser in *The Goose Woman*, and Vilma Bankey and Ronald Coleman in *The Dark Angel*. Harold Lloyd's *The Freshman* came the following week.

Vaudeville producers Fanchon and Marco used the Rialto as an important tryout stage for new talent before booking them into their top house, the Paramount in Los Angeles. Our little theater sported no less than 10 dressing rooms, a scenery loft, green room, orchestra pit, and a "deep" stage.

On a Saturday in January 1928, The Rialto Sweetelia opened up next to the theater, giving free ice cream cones to patrons that came in between 2 p.m. and 6 p.m. on opening day. I'll bet that was a big hit, even in January.

As the popularity of vaudeville waned somewhat, the stage gave



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way to twice weekly performances of the Charles Royal Players in such plays as *Charlie's Aunt*, *Peg O My Heart*, and *The Outcast*. Vaudeville did return to the Rialto in the early thirties when the theater succeeded in attracting the Orpheum Theater's musical conductor, a man named Frankenstein. The Depression led to other gimmicks. On Bank Night cash was given away-grand prize being \$1. Dish Night offered a free Depression glass item for each patron.

A backstage fire closed the theater for several months in the late 1930s, after which, neither vaude-



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ville nor live stage performances were ever again presented at the Rialto. For a time, the theater did host concerts by famed organists, such as George Wright, Robert Israel and Gaylord B. Carter. But alas, after surviving another fire in 1968, the theatre organ was removed and sold.

The theater has also survived several attempts to end its colorful legacy. One proposal was to gut it for a health club. Another plan, "in the interest of urban renewal," proposed to demolish it entirely for a parking lot. But an unexpectedly large and vocal group of citizens mounted effective and successful campaigns to save the Rialto, not once but twice.

Landmark Theatres purchased the Rialto in 1976 and plans to restore the theater, promising to preserve its historic character. A sensitive multiplexing arrangement has been proposed and is certainly preferable to demolition. But with multiplexes multiplying so multitudinously, multisaturation must

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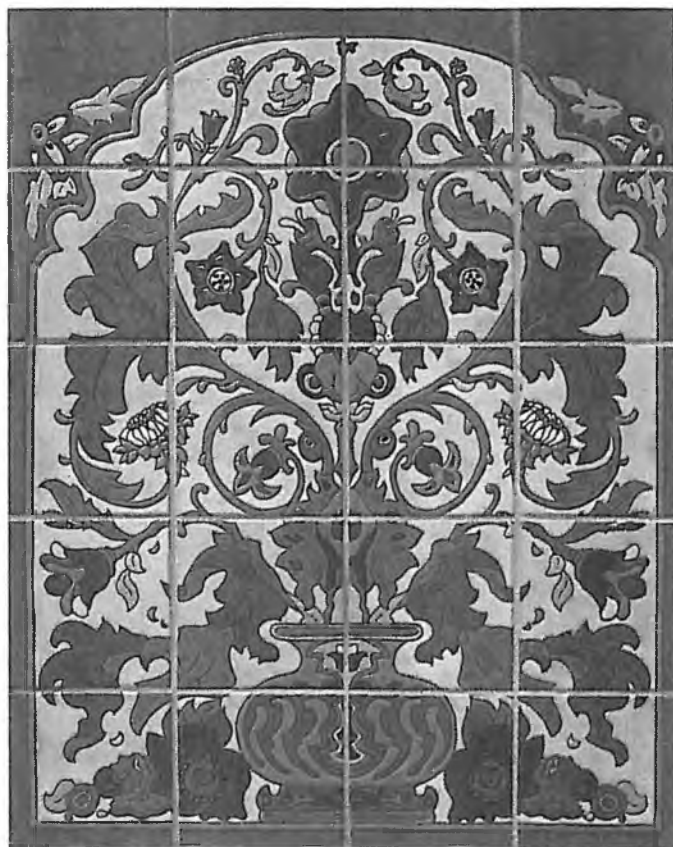


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surely be near at hand.

Perhaps the hope and dream of many who love the movies and cherish the legacy of the great and near-great movie palaces, is still possible and that a rebirth of the single-screen movie and live performance palace is not a pipe-organ dream. Instead of seeing how many screens we can pack into a given space, why can't we compete for the best place to experience a movie?

The Rialto is badly in need of repair and restoration. Assuming that will happen in the not-too-distant future, there might yet be a place for a theater that has personality and community history, things not many theaters in the area can offer. Landmark Theatres has proven ability to bring in the kind of films the public wants to see. Let's hope they can make the place we want to see them a real landmark theater. †

Glen Duncan is a South Pasadena resident and a member of the Cultural Heritage Commission.



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"All eyes will turn toward Fair Oaks and Oxley Saturday night." So promised a 1925 advertisement for the grand premier of South Pasadena's Rialto Theater, a promise which has been repeatedly fulfilled since the theater opened 67 years ago last October.

The Saturday night opening featured, "by special arrangement with Universal Pictures, the world's premiere of a major event," of which "a number of the famous members of the cast will attend," as well as five "high-class" vaudeville acts, an organ solo on the new mammoth Wurlitzer, and the Rialto Orchestra which, under the leadership of Rhuel Eno Moulton, provided musical accompaniment for the vaudeville and the picture program.

The evening's events, which proved to be a smashing success, also set the precedent for years of artistic distinction at the theater, a distinction that continues today.

The Rialto was a cultural and architectural oddity from the very beginning. The interior and exterior styles are a unique blend of Egyptian, Neo-classical, and Moorish, reflecting the flamboyant character of its designer, L.A. Smith.

Something of an enigma himself, coming from obscurity and disappearing after a brief but meteoric career, Smith was nevertheless one of the most prolific theater designers in Southern California of the late teens and early 20's, having designed several dozen class A theaters in Los Angeles. From 1921 to 1925 he was the de facto corporate architect for West Coast Theaters, using east Indian and Egyptian influences in his designs for such theaters as the Highland, in Highland Park, and the Beverly, in Beverly Hills.

West Coast Theaters were the owners of several theaters in Pasadena, including the Academy, (which was also designed by Smith), who were looking to expand into South Pasadena to find a venue for some of their more risque films and entertainment, and avoid the censorship they had been subject to in Pasadena. Heralded for his ornate, fantastic style, Smith was given carte blanche in his designs for the Rialto by the West Coast group.

The Rialto proved to be a watershed for Smith, serving as the last and best example of his style before his career was eclipsed by competing, and evidently plagiaristic, architects within his own company. He mysteriously vanished into obscurity shortly afterwards.

The two-story building is a combination of styles on the outside. The stucco exterior and terra-cotta tile make up the moorish style, while the facade of 4 brick pilasters supporting a simple cornice, and the entrance, with its scroll brackets and lunette pediment describe a neo-classical appearance.

The interior is a lavish example of Smith's flamboyant and eclectic style, an expression of moorish and egyptian fantasy that makes the connection with what is the essence of of films: surreality.

At the opening, the walls were covered with colorful paintings and draperies of "richest reds, blues, greens and yellows blended into restful mellowness under carefully shielded lights," according to one reviewer. Ornate egyptian carvings took up every other available space. A Batchelder-tile drinking fountain, graced with peacock tiles, stood off to the left of the entrance.

The stage was 30 feet deep, more than adequate for legitimate theater and vaudeville stage productions. There was an orchestra pit, a scenery loft, and a mammoth Wurlitzer organ.

Close to 1200 people filled the theater that night, choosing between the 800 seats

downstairs or the huge, overstuffed armchairs in the balconies. They were entertained by Roy Metcalfe, the Raymond Theater's concert organist, trapeze artists, the actress Norma Gregg in "an original novelty," The Stein Trio singers and Grant Gardner, "that gentleman singer from the Canary Islands."

Immediately following, they were introduced to Reginald Demy and Laura La Plante, the stars of Universal Pictures' world premiere of the silent comedy "Whatever Happened to Jones," shown for the first time at the Rialto.

From then on, the Rialto's established policy for entertainment was to run a feature length film and present vaudeville acts on Sundays, Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays, with a total of four changes of program per week. Admission was 30 cents for the floor, 40 cents for the balconies and children under 12 got in for a dime. On Sundays the concert organist Charles Wright would give performances on the grand Wurlitzer.

The theater was also known as a try-out stage for new vaudeville acts. The talent producers Fanchon and Marco placed many acts first at the Rialto, then moved the more successful ones to their top house, The Paramount Theater, in Los Angeles.

A few years later, after the Rialto's 1929 premiere of its first talkie, vaudeville was replaced by twice-weekly matinee performances of the Charles Royal Players, in such plays as "Charlie's Aunt," "Peg O' My Heart" and "The Outcast," which would accompany a feature length film.

The original marquee, a two-line reader board featuring white glass and tin, changeable letters, was replaced by the larger, 3-line, 3-face neon moderne/art deco marquee that still stands today.

Although vaudeville resumed in the early 30's after the Rialto management succeeded in attracting the Orpheum Theater's musical conductor, a man with the intriguing name of Frankenstein, a backstage fire closed the theater for a few months, and neither vaudeville nor live drama have graced the stage since.

The Rialto slipped into the background over the years, becoming faded in both appearance and in relative importance to the growth and sophistication of the newer movie houses and their audiences. Ultimately, its very existence appeared to be on the line when, in 1977, the Community Redevelopment Agency (CRA) of South Pasadena pushed for its demolition to make parking space for their proposed strip mall.

Threatened with extinction, the Rialto suddenly found itself riding a wave of popular support for its preservation, in a movement spearheaded by the Friends of the Theater and the South Pasadena Cultural Heritage Commission. With over 3000 signed petitions from local patrons, and public support from art and theater critics, such as Charles Champlin of the *Los Angeles Times*, the rally to save the Rialto gained enough momentum to halt the theater's destruction, and ultimately designate the Rialto as a city landmark, and place it on the National Register of Historic Places.

The inclusion on the National Registry recognizes the theater as an importantly significant historic resource, in its architecture, its exhibiting policies and its social impact. It also provides a degree of protection from future wrecking balls.

In 1985, the Rialto made news again, this time with a splashy celebration of the theater's 60th year anniversary, sponsored by the South Pasadena Preservation Foundation. Various dignitaries arrived in period cars, pulling up in front of the brightly-lit theater as though it were the grand opening of 1925. Opening with theater organ

music, (the organ had to be brought in, the original Wurlitzer having burned in 1971), there were sing-a-longs of 20's tunes, a number of 1920's comedy shorts with the feature film being the 1925 classic, "The Phantom of the Opera."

Today, the Rialto still stands, a historic testimonial to the changes in our society, as well as to the need to mark and preserve those pieces of our past. Acquired by the Landmark theater chain in 1976, the Rialto is now what is known as a "revival" theater, playing non-Hollywood-mainstream films. The facade is essentially the same, a little more worn, a little chipped, a little faded. Inside, it houses what is probably the best preserved example of L.A. Smith's work. The colors are a little darker, having been repainted some years ago, and someone has shamelessly painted over the batchelder-tile drinking fountain. Although it has not been used in over 50 years, there is still an intact scenery loft above the stage, one of the few theaters that can boast that claim.

And the overstuffed chairs are still upstairs, the egyptian carvings are still all there, and, in the semi-dark of the theater, munching popcorn and watching another world unfold before you on the large screen, you can still connect to the fantasy and to the magic that originally inspired the rich architecture of this movie house.

